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ABSTRACT

Modern society is an ever-changing pattern of pressure and counter pressure. A social movement in conflict with the dominant society is labeled with easily identifiable stereotypes--bearded long hairs, bra burners, terrorists, bleeding hearts, uneducated rednecks. Traditional criticism has failed to say anything meaningful about social movements because it fails to recognize that these movements themselves are, by nature, rhetorical. It is only when the underlying purposes, goals, and intents of a movement are isolated that analysis of its rhetoric approaches reliability. The form of a movement is rhetorical because in order to exist movements must succeed in altering perceptions of the dominant society. The strength and most important dimension of a movement lies in its ability to alter perceptual realities and to call persons to action on the basis of that alteration. In essence, revolutionary social movements force the formation of a new "Gestalt," and the transactions between this movement and the old "Gestalt" form a counter synthesis. (RB)

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COUNTER SYNTHESIS: A CRITICAL APPROACH TO SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

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Appreciation is due to Nancy Reiches for collaboration on the idea of counter synthesis. See her unpublished M.A. thesis, University of Colorado, 1972, entitled "A Configural Rhetoric of Contemporary Social Movements."

Modern society is an ever-changing pattern of social pressure and counter-pressure. The efforts to maintain balance within this melieu presents rhetorical critics with a unique opportunity for the study of social movements. But these movements are difficult--possibly impossible--to study with traditional methods.

A social movement in conflict with dominant society is labeled with easily-identifiable stereotypes--bra-burners, bearded long hairs, terrorists, bleeding hearts, uneducated red-necks. These are the surface representations of deeper lying social movements.

Such faults in the analysis of movements prevail in the news media and in society in general. Unfortunately, the field of rhetorical criticism has not examined much beyond surface manifestations giving rise to stereotypes. Studying a social movement by concentrating only on separate rhetorical instances within that movement generates the same sort of distorted picture held by society as a whole. It is only when the underlying purposes, goals and intents of a movement are isolated that analysis of its rhetoric approaches reliability. I maintain that these purposes, goals and intents can be isolated only when the essential point of conflict between the movement and dominant society is isolated.

Traditional criticism has failed to say anything meaningful about social movements because it fails to recognize that these movements themselves are, by nature, rhetorical. Critics have looked for rhetoric <u>within</u> a movement. In opposition to this Robert Cathcart argues that a complete rhetorical definition <u>of</u> a movement is needed. Cathcart views movements as being essentially rhetorical in nature and says that

formulation of rhetoric proclaiming a new order in response to the dialectical tension of a moral conflict signals the beginning of a movement.[1] Not only is a movement rhetorical in inception, but in all of its symbolic actions thereafter.

Traditional criticism also has failed to give adequate consideration to the alternative choices of action generated by a social movement. Herbert Simons calls for an entirely new attitude in the study of conflict--a shift from "establishment" bias toward a dual perspective giving both actors equal emphasis. In particular, Simons suggests analysis of institutions and structures as influence agents, and analysis of the meanings of violence (coercive persuasion) in acts of protest and revolt.[2]

Traditional criticism also has failed to build a foundation for theory-generation and prediction, stopping instead at the descriptive level. This is due, in part, to inadequate methodology.

A social movement seminar last spring at the University of Michigan suggests development of methodologies combining rhetorical, sociological and cultural perspectives. It recommends that critics study incipient movements in an effort to be predictive as well as descriptive. It also suggests analogue criticism, compararing two or more phases of a single movement.[3]

In response to such explicit needs for more fruitful rhetorical examination of social movements, I offer 1) a critical framework for approaching social movements, 2) some predictions drawn from that framework, and 3) a testing of that critical stance and its predictions against the women's liberation movement.

CRITICAL FRAMEWORK: COUNTER SYNTHESIS

To define a movement, an expansion of Cathcart's statement that movements are essentially rhetorical is necessary. The form of a movement is rhetorical because movements, to exist, must succeed in altering perceptions of a given society. Simons defines a movement as "an uninstitutionalized collectivity that mobilizes for action to implement a program for the reconstitution of social norms or values."[4] The unique dimension of a movement, then, is its ability to alter perceptual realities and to call persons to action on the basis of that alteration.

In this paper, I am primarily interested in revolutionary social movements where the perceptual alteration is radical. Revolutionary movements force formation of a new Gestalt. They do not use traditional linear means, changing one act, then another, then an institution, etc. As Anthony C. Wallace says, in revolutionary movements: "A, B, C, D, E, . . . N are shifted into a new Gestalt abruptly and simultaneously in intent; and frequently within a few years the new plan is put into effect by the participants in the movement."[5] The movement's goal is reconstruction of the entire social order, and its most basic strategy is defiance of the fundamental assumptions, philosophical presuppositions, and/or ideology of an institution or its programs or policies. Since even its existence is in contradiction to the norm, the rhetoric of a social movement is all of its symbolic actions. The rhetorical transactions between this movement and the old Gestalt I label counter synthesis.

With this view of rhetorical transactions between the movement and the existing order, a critic can formulate an analysis of the movement--

its scope, its intensity, its impact. The counter synthetic nature of the movement is a firm base for predictions.

The persuasive power of a revolutionary social movement does not lie in i' appeal to a body of shared beliefs (even though rhetoricians in the past have tended to make that sort of appeal a requirement for persuasion). Its true power lies in its ability to avoid any identification with the existing social order. It must refuse to be co-opted in any way. It must be counter to an entire order. The concept of counter synthesis can deal with these requirements, while traditional critical approaches cannot.

The ideas embodied in counter synthesis grew from a need to extend premises outlined by Edwin Black. He discussed argumentation as a genre and particularly considered argumentative incompatibilities. While the "arguments" presented by a social movement and the corresponding instututional response may be considered incompatable, they do not fit within Black's definition. Black explains that incompatable arguments inherently possess the potential for argumentative synthesis, subsuming the issues of a controversy under a more broadly appealing rubric. Quoting Black: "The issues of the old controversy are now seen to be minor elements in a complex system of thought that comprehends many more issues than are included in the old controversy."[6] This analysis rests on a habit of thought in our field (and others) that "social conflicts are conceptually equivalent to mere differences of opinion."[7] Communication scholars tend to refer to conflicts as only "disagreements," "controversies," or "communication breakdowns." It is this approach to conflict study that Simons criticizes and that I say is inappropriate for the study of social movements. Simons argues:

> A controversy is a difference of opinion but a genuine conflict is more than that. In Coser's words, it is a 'struggle over values and claims to scarce status, power and resources in which the aims of the opponents are to neutralize, injure, or eliminate the rivals.' To resolve a controversy, talk is often sufficient; . . . . But in a genuine conflict talk between parties is seldom enough. Each party may search for common ground with his adversary but there will also be irreconcilable differences that are perceived to be so basic as to prompt the kind of struggle Coser has referred to.[8]

A revolutionary social movement exemplifies Simons' point. It arises from real differences and it proposes an order logically contradictory to the existing one. The alternatives available to an auditor are mutually exclusive, and the choice he must make when confronted is unique. The decision point in a revolutionary social movement involves an entire mental set, the psycho-social reality on which one has based his life style. The decision does not involve finding a broader frame of reference which encompasses new views (argumentative synthesis); it necessitates rejecting one world view in favor of another.

Counter synthesis provides the focus for rhetorical criticism of ongoing revolutionary movements. Resulting transactions are not to be evaluated by analyzing shared beliefs or disbeliefs, but by examining the confrontation of choices arising from conflicting belief systems.

PREDICTIONS

A focus on the counter synthetic nature of a revolutionary social movement provides the rhetorical critic with a certain amount of predictive power. Here are some generalized predictions:

1. A revolutionary social movement exists only while true counter synthesis--an overt clash of Gestalts--continues. Those elements over which counter synthetic transactions occur are the essence of the movement. Identifying these allows the critic to eliminate fringe elements or parallel actions of the movement and to concentrate on its core.

In the women's liberation movement, the difference between the politicos and the feminists is a case in point. The politicos are a fringe element of women's liberation who analyze situations in the light of a tradition of thought, a system of political ideology. Though their proposed system is different from the existing one, it nonetheless fits within the old Gestalt. It argues that if politics change, everything else will also change. The National Organization of Women (NOW) is a leading politico group. The feminists, on the other hand, see the essential problem as more deeply cultural than the political system. The change they demand is in the entire philosophical viewpoint and process of acculturation. This approach attacks the entirety of the old Gestalt. Because the critic defines the feminists' demands as counter synthetic rather than political and fitting in the framework of argumentative synthesis, he can profitably eliminate the politicos from an analysis of women's liberation. Recognizing their separateness from the core of the movement simplifies the critic's task of explaining the feminists' reactions to and interactions with them.

2. While counter synthesis continues, the critic can predict what type of interaction will occur between movement and institution. Unlike a reform effort which utilizes status quo mores in attempting to criticize

certain defects, the counter synthetic movement attacks the value structure itself. The reform effort can utilize existing "respectable" institutions as a medium, but, by rejecting widely held values, the counter synthetic movement has prohibited itself from using traditional means. Therefore, communication efforts originating from the movement tend to be unusual, unexpected and even bizarre. Since the movement must avoid argumentative synthesis, it will always attack norms, even in its basic linguistic and behavioral patterns.

The interaction resulting from two entirely different Gestalts will usually be superficial. The strategies and techniques of the movement are so unique they tend to attract more attention than the value structure they represent. They can be ignored, discounted and ridiculed. Even if they stimulate corresponding action, there will be little impact on the institutional value structure since only symptoms have been dealt with. In fact, this sort of action could be employed as an institutional strategy diverting time, energy, and attention to tangential aspects of the movement.

3. Conversion will be radical. Herbert Blumer suggested that a revolutionary movement "operates more like a religion"[9] than does a reform movement. Rather than attempting to enlist support from a disinterested public, the counter synthetic movement seeks converts. The choices acceptable to the movement are limited. If one gives up an entire life style to embrace another, the change is of necessity and by definition radical. That is the only change recognized by the movement.

Because the clash is total, members of the movement encounter frustration, which may lead to reverse conversion, backsliding, or at least an active search for argumentative synthesis.

WOMEN'S LIBERATION: A COUNTER SYNTHETIC MOVEMENT

A contemporary movement particularly striking in its counter synthetic nature is the women's liberation movement. The essence of women's liberation--which must be understood to analyze it--is that two fundamentally opposed Gestalts are at war. Women cannot be innately as capable as men and not as capable as men at the same time. Compromise (women are better at one thing and men at another) is unacceptable because the sexist Gestalt circumscribes the areas within which men and women are allowed to perform. Even peaceful coexistence is impossible, for one point of view negates the very existence of the other.

One of the first tasks of women's liberation was to identify and characterize the existing Gestalt, for it had not been specifically recognized as an ideology before. They have named the prevailing ideology "sexism." Once the analysis of sexism had been developed, women could assess their attitudes toward the existing Gestalt and begin to develop a philosophy of what should be. Sandra L. and Daryl J. Bem explain the ideological conditioning culminating in the sexist Gestalt.

> . . .what happens when all an individual's reference groups agree, when his religion, his family, his peers, his teachers, and the mass media all disseminate the same message? The consequence is a nonconscious ideology, a set of beliefs and attitudes which he accepts implicitly but which remains outside his awareness because alternative conceptions of the world remain unimagined.
>
> A society's ability to inculcate this kind of ideology into its citizens is the most subtle and most profound form of social influence. It is also the most difficult kind of social influence to challenge because it remains invisible. Even those

> who consider themselves sufficiently radical or intellectual to have rejected the basic premises of a particular societal ideology often find their belief systems unexpectedly cluttered with its remnants.
>
> In our view, there is no ideology which better exemplifies these points than the beliefs and attitudes which most Americans hold about women. Not only do most men and women in our society hold hidden prejudices about the woman's "natural" role, but these nonconscious beliefs motivate a host of subtle practices that are dramatically effective at keeping her "in her place." Even many liberal Americans, who insist that a black skin should not uniquely qualify its owner for janitorial and domestic service, continue to assume that the possession of a uterus uniquely qualifies its owner for precisely that.[10]

The intent of women's liberation is the subversion of the sexist ideology identified by the Bems. In some cases, the mere awareness of such a prevaling Gestalt has shifted men and women into the feminist ideology. From awareness, feminists are seeking to counter sexism by creating new perspectives.

This goal--the establishment of the feminist ideology--is based on two fundamental concepts. First and most basically, women's liberation argues there are no inherent emotional, intellectual or psychological differences between men and women. All existing differences result from socially imposed values. From this point of view, women's liberation argues secondly that the power relationships resulting from these imposed values destroy freedom.

The most distinctive method of persuading others that men and women are equal in ability has been through consciousness raising. Consciousness raising exists on two levels. The first is its practice within the movement for women seeking to expand their own awareness of

the new ideology. It is a vehicle by which women see themselves in a class relationship with power potential. Counter synthetic elements within this process include the emphasis on personal experience as a foundation for theoretical analysis and the exclusion of men from meetings. Also radically different from established patterns of behavior are the efforts to avoid elitism, that is, development a hierarchial power structure within a group. The second level of consciousness raising is directed toward individuals outside the movement.

Consideration of the goal makes much of the behavior of women's liberationists understandable. Again, the framework of counter synthesis provides a way to handle unusual rhetorical manisfestations. In order to awaken outsiders to the sexist philosophy that is so much a part of them, advocates of women's liberation have at times deemed it necessary to radically violate the standards of behavior within the sexist Gestalt. In general, women's liberation has sought raised consciousness by radically non-traditional means.

> Their style was personal, their rhetoric emotional, their manner of operating antihierarchical, anti-leadership, resting on autonomous small groups. their style was one of direct action rather than lobbying. Policy makers had a hard time dealing with them, first because Movement Women dealt with topics that embarrassed them, and also because Movement Women were less interested in formal policy per se than in its underlying sexist preconceptions.[11]

The goal has been shock value resulting in education.

In addition to the goal of consciousness raising, behaviors violating the old Gestalt have also fulfilled the need for women's liberation to

distance itself stylistically from sexism. By developing their own language style, and through various zap actions, women have refused to be co-opted by the establishment. Their behaviors demand modifications in the communicative style of the establishment before meaningful interaction between women's liberation and the establishment can occur. Such behaviors amplify the ideological gulf and deny the possibility of argumentative synthesis.

Women's liberation's second point, that the sexist power structure destroys freedom, leads to their definition of the personal as political. The identification of sexism is the crucial prerequisite for the widely expanded definition of political. It seems a big step from personal intimacy to a wide context of political reference, but Kate Millett makes this leap reasonable by her explanation of politics. Her definition, and that of women's liberation at large, transcends the politician's world of meetings, Robert's Rules of Order, and political parties. She says, "The term 'politics' shall refer to power structured relationships, arrangements whereby one group of persons is controlled by another."[12] In this light, the power relationships exhibited in sexual acts are political and serve as a prototype for the relationships found between the sexes in all areas of life.

If all practices of our culture are based on the concept of sexism, and the movement argues that they are, all these practices can be seen as promulgating its ideology. Therefore, the movement must expose, oppose and alter all of them. These are political measures. Such apparently innocuous aspects of life as fashion, housework and patterns of friendship are as political as the more obvious issues of equal wages, equal rights

and equal opportunity. The radical nature of the demands of women's liberation is such that if achieved, they would change the entire psycho-social reality on which our culture is based. The existing value system, sexism, would be overthrown and replaced.

The ideological war, then, is waged on two fronts. To a degree, it exists within each member of the movement, because each person has gone through the acculturation process and has had to deal with his (her?) own primal concepts of self. The second front is the more obvious one between the movement and the larger public, and there the conflict is vitriolic, and a backlash of significant proportions has arisen.

The existence of a backlash is significant in an analysis seeking to establish that the rhetoric of a social movement is all of its symbolic actions. Rarely is the backlash directed toward a specific speech or speaker; instead, it picks and chooses from the welter of stimuli flung from the movement. Some stimuli, in fact, have never been articulated until individuals in the backlash do so; these "problems" are, nonetheless, just as real to the backlash constituency as if all the primary figures of women's liberation had been expounding them. No critic could ever identify all the ways in which a movement communicates, but the existence of the backlash indicates that the movement's totality is as communicative as any singular aspect of it.

This overview of women's liberation indicates the usefulness of the idea of counter synthesis in explaining and predicting and in interpreting interactions and transactions more fully.

DISCUSSION OF PREDICTIONS

One prediction of this paper was that revolutionary social movements exist only while counter synthesis occurs. The course of the historical Women's Rights Movement illustrates this. The first feminist movement in the United States spanned a century, from approximately 1818 until 1920. Espousing women's rights during that period of time was more counter synthetic than even today. The movement's purpose was so counter to accepted practice and ideology that the women involved were generally considered fringe lunatics or "endearingly" misguided. The sexist Gestalt was so ingrained that history books do not even deal with the Women's Rights Movement except in footnotes to temperance or suffrage. Temperance and suffrage were both drives within the Women's Rights Movement, but they were only tangential aspects of the larger goals of the movement. Yet temperance and suffrage were tangible and specific and became the focus of the movement. The larger goals of the feminists were nonnegotiable--how can a woman negotiate the claim that she should be recognized as a human being with all the rights attendant thereto? Consequently, the larger goal was ignored. The opposition refused to even consider the feminist heresy. Eventually its advocates tired of failure and retreated to an issue that could be handled--suffrage. And after a long battle, women did achieve suffrage, but the significant issues they had raised remained for fifty years to be picked up finally by the women's liberation movement. The The Women's Rights Movement died after suffrage was won. The essential conflict over ideology was no longer the focus of the movement; lacking counter synthesis, the movement could not exist.

A second prediction was that the interactions resulting from two entirely different Gestalts generally will be superficial. The unique strategies of the movement will attract more attention than the value structure they represent. Women's liberation must break through the barriers insulating those outside the movement from ideas they consider unpalatable. The movement has tried various sorts of consciousness raising, zap actions, street theatre, and numerous demonstrations. The tactics have been fairly effective, but they call attention to themselves rather than to the underlying ideas. The resulting backlash to the movement focuses on surface issues oftentimes unrelated to the movement's demands. The Miss America demonstration in September, 1968, exemplifies actions in which the main thrust argument was lost. Women were attempting to argue through street theatre that all women are hurt by beauty contests, that such competition is degrading to femininity. A sheep was crowned Miss America and a "freedom trashcan" was set up in which women could discard symbols of the traditional ideas of femininity. Items suggested for discard were old bras, girdles, high heeled shoes, women's magazines, curlers, etc. From this particular action, admittedly striking, came the misrepresentation of women in the movement as "bra-burners." In fact, no bras were burned.

The third prediction was that conversion to the goals of the movement will be radical. The most graphic description of this process is called the "click of consciousness." The click signals an abrupt shift in viewpoint, conversion if you will. The concept of counter synthesis explains why an individual once shifted into the new Gestalt cannot then return to the old.

The two cannot coexist. It is like an optical illusion; once you see the thing that had been concealed, you can no longer be fooled by the illusion.

The click can occur in any number of personal experiences. A husband steps over a pile of toys mumbling to his wife, "Why don't you put this stuff away?" A man writes to Ms. magazine, "I am cancelling my wife's subscription;" she writes, "I am not cancelling my subscription." At a dinner party, Mr. Smith keeps telling Mrs. Smith to get up and help Mrs. Jones. A woman plans to tell an anecdote about lunch in the executive dining room; she halts when her husband laughts, "Ho, ho, ho, my little wife in an executive dining room!" A business woman orders the businessmen's lunch and is told it is served only to men. A "good student's" car insurance reduction policy is allowed only for boys. A client asks the woman in an office to place a call for him; he assumes she is the secretary, but she is the attorney with whom he has an appointment.

The click of consciousness comes as a surprise because it heralds attitudes never considered before. It introduces a revolution in life style. Demands which would seem perfectly reasonable such as equal pay for equal work, equal chance for advancement, equal educational opportunities, refusal to feel guilt over success, and shared responsibility at home become radical because they would inherently cause changes in such traditional institutions as marriage, child rearing, and social relationships. The "click," or conversion, therefore, is total or not at all.

The women's liberation movement is continuing. It is attacking stereotyped thinking, and it still has a long way to go. Just how strong the sexist Gestalt still is was indicated recently when Senator Goldwater

was asked his opinion on the possibility of a woman Vice President. He was quoted as saying, "I have nothing against a woman, just so she gets home in time to cook dinner." As long as American males not only think but feel free to express such thoughts, the women's liberation movement will be counter synthetic indeed.

With a focus on the essential clash between Gestalts, the rhetorical critic can provide insight into a contemporary movement. This framework allows a workable definition of the movement and an understanding of its rhetorical transactions. It allows evaluation by examination of the confrontation of choices arising from conflicting Gestalts. It also lays a foundation for prediction and because it delineates its focus, it offers the opportunity for critics to seek intersubjective reliability in their efforts toward theory building.

FOOTNOTES

[1]"New Approaches to the Study of Movements: Defining Movements Rhetorically," Western Speech, XXXVI, 2 (Spring, 1972), 72-88.

[2]"Persuasion in Social Conflicts: A Critique of Prevailing Conceptions and a Framework for Future Research," Speech Monographs, XXXIX, 4 ((November, 1972), 227-247.

[3]"University of Michigan: The Rhetoric of Social Movements," Spectra, X, 4 (August, 1974), 8-9.

[4]"Requirements, Problems, and Strategies: A Theory of Persuasion for Social Movements," QJS, LVI (February, 1970), 3.

[5]"Revitalization Movements," in Studies in Social Movements, ed. Barry McLaughlin (New York: The Free Press, 1969) p. 34.

[6]Rhetorical Criticism: A Study in Method (New York: MacMillan Co., 1965), p. 156.

[7]Simons, "Persuasion in Social Conflicts," 230.

[8]Ibid., 231. Simons cites Lewis A. Coser, Continuities in the Study of Social Conflict (New York: Free Press, 1967), Chapter 1.

[9]"Social Movements," in Studies in Social Movements, ed. Barry McLaughlin (New York: The Free Press, 1969), p. 22.

[10]Beliefs, Attitudes, and Human Affairs (Belmont, California: Brooks Cole Publishing Company, 1970), p. 89.

[11]Jessie Bernard, Women and the Public Interest (Chicago: Aldine Atheron, Inc., 1971), p.39.

[12]Sexual Politics (Garden City: Doubleday, 1970), p. 23.

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